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ABSTRACT

The argument that the personality structures obtained from retrospective ratings reflect semantic similarity structures has been as provocative as a red cape in the bull ring. High congruence between those two kinds of structures seems well established. What is less clear is how and why those structures differ from that for immediate judgments of the same behaviors. The time interval between perceiving the pertinent behavior and making a judgment about it is involved in such differences. Another is the level of abstraction involved in the variables usually used. More fundamental than this ongoing controversy, however, is the fact that there is no one personality structure: personality structures change with the variables studied and even with the instruments used to measure any one set of variables. To get dependable, replicable findings, the observer's idiosyncratic contributions must be separated from his judgments. This can be done by concentrating on simple, short actions. Alternatively, how people make attributive judgments can be studied as well as the evaluative judgments that people must make about others, in carrying out the activities of everyday living. (Author)

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Red Capes, Red Herrings, and Red Flags

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The argument that the personality structures obtained from retrospective ratings reflect semantic similarity structures has been as provocative as the red capes flourished in the bull ring. It has aroused strong feelings and vigorous charges. Sometimes these charges have been with head down, aimed at goring the irritating cape but losing perspective on the problems and issues involved.

Changing the analogy, some of that research and argument, and some of the rebuttal research and argument, have drawn red herrings across the trail, distracting us from where we should be going. I want to suggest today that we should see the several empirical findings related to this controversy as red flags, warning us to watch our step, to slow our frantic activity while we examine the whole situation judiciously before proceeding.

I am all for the re-analysis of old data and the compilation of findings bearing on an issue--we do too little of that. Yet those studies on semantic and rater structures have not been completely satisfactory. I would like to see more investigations designed to provide clear-cut tests for the propositions about similarities between the structures of semantic similarity judgments and of retrospective personality ratings, and the contrasting structures for immediate judgments on the same variables. The weight of the evidence, however, seems clear to me: there are several bodies of data yielding

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the same pattern of results, and none that involved all three types of structure have ~~found a different~~ disconfirmed that pattern.

So I accept as fairly well established the generalization that a set of retrospective ratings on a diverse set of personality traits will show one structure of relationships and that judgments of semantic similarity between these same trait labels will show essentially the same structure. What is less well established is the conclusion that data from judgments made during or immediately after the observed segment of behavior will show a different structure characterized by lower degrees of relationship.

From the papers we have already heard today, two basic factors are involved in these matters. One is the time interval between perceiving the pertinent behavior and making a judgment about it: judgments based on what is happening or what has just happened involved a different process from that in judgments based on recollections of perceived behavior that occurred hours or days earlier. The second factor is the level of abstraction of the variables involved. The empirical findings are very likely to be different for simple variables involving little interpretation or inference and for more abstract, broader variables that clearly require much interpretation of behavior. We will come back to these later. (A third factor is the duration of the behavior sample rated. Its importance emerges in Mike Wish's paper.)

For now, let us look at the word, "structure." It always gives me trouble. It is a broad, abstract term with several meanings. Resorting to a standard dictionary, I find as one meaning, and I quote: "Figuratively, the interrelation of parts as dominated by the general character of the whole; as, the structure of society." When we refer to the pattern of relationships obtained from ratings of personality variables as personality structure, we are making a big inference: what we really mean is that we think the observed relationships

reflect some underlying structure in people, the structure of their personalities.

In terms of the title of this symposium, any obtained personality rating is a fact recording that rater R attributed trait T to subject S. And similarly, any obtained personality structure is a fact; it is the set of obtained correlations among ratings made under some specifiable conditions. Correlations among ratings, and correlations between ratings and other variables, are primary data from which we draw conclusions about personality and its structure. But how dependable are they? There are many such sets of obtained correlations among ratings, many such structures. There is no one structure of personality.

First, there are at least as many structures as there are taxonomies of personality concepts. Each list of personality traits or dispositions can be used for ratings of personality and will yield a pattern of relationships. There will be certain semantic similarities between that pattern and the pattern from some one else's taxonomy, but no one has produced a list of variables that persuasively compel their general acceptance as the taxonomy for personality yielding the structure of personality.

Second, even for any single taxonomy, there is no one definitive structure. The obtained structure for a taxonomy depends upon the measuring operations used to collect the ratings. For example, the relationship between a pair of Murray's needs depends upon the instrument used (Fiske, 1973). Although any one instrument tends to yield the same pattern in similar samples of subjects, yet the raters, the ratees, and the context of the ratings can at times affect the pattern obtained.

In the present discussion, then, we mean by structure the set of relationships among variables--in this case, ratings. So we need to go back and look at these ratings, which are typically of traits or similar variables. Each rating is a product of interactions among rater, ratee, and rating task. By rating task, I mean the label and definition given for each concept to be rated, the instructions for making the rating, and the purpose of making the rating. The rater interacts with the ratee and also with the task. The ratee and the task interact. Such interactions are of course very general, if not universal, in psychological phenomena. But, as Cronbach (1975) has so ably argued and demonstrated, interactions in psychology are undependable and hard to replicate. And they are unstable over time. From his review, Cronbach concludes that, in psychology, we may never be able to establish general laws like those in established sciences.

A rating is a judgment made about a person on the basis of having observed that person over some longer or shorter period of time. All too little is known about how such integrative cognitive acts are carried out. We do know that answering an inventory question about oneself or others may be done in several ways: for example, by reference to some general impression about the subject, by recalling some recent vivid behavior, and by changing the question in some way (Kuncel, 1973, 1977; Minor & Fiske, 1976). Similar processes probably occur in making a typical rating.

Let's look more closely at the process in the usual procedure of rating a person retrospectively on a series of personality descriptors. Suppose I am asked to rate someone on talkativeness. I retrieve visual images of that person in one or more situations and decide how much of the time the person was talking, and then code that impression into the response alternatives

provided on the rating form. If the next trait is dishonesty (borrowing an example from Reed and Jackson, 1977), I try to recall any time when I felt the person demonstrated dishonesty. I may recall some of the same situations retrieved in the earlier rating of talkativeness, but I am searching my memory for a quite different kind of impression.

But now suppose I come to dominance on the rating list and retrieve some images and some recollections of my impressions about the person influencing others. Then I have to rate assertiveness. That term brings up much the same images and impressions as in the prior rating of dominance. The semantic similarity between dominance and assertiveness and the overlap in their connotations leads me to base both ratings on much the same retrieved mental content. I am using much the same evidence for both ratings. And of course the particular impressions just retrieved for rating dominance are especially likely to come back into my mind as I rate assertiveness. The more similar the meanings of two personality variables, the more similar the experiential evidence that a rater will use in rating them. Semantic similarity of labels generates similarity of impressions used in rating, and perhaps even similarity of interpretations of those recalled impressions. Hence it is not surprising that the relative semantic similarity between variables is found to be related to relative correspondence between attributions of those variables.

I have just told you what I think goes on when I make ratings. But that process is a complex one, and I trust no one's introspective report, not even my own, to give the whole story. The evidence gathered by Nisbett and Wilson (1977) and by Nisbett and Bellows (1977) demonstrates to me that people can't tell us exactly what influenced their judgments.

Personality ratings depend much too much on the rater and the rater's

cognitive schemas. Each rater's ratings has its own structure, its own pattern of relationships. We would like to get the contribution of the individual rater out of the picture. The standard way of doing that is to use the mean of several raters, but that is something like determining the taste of stew by averaging the flavors of several stews.

As another analogy, rating personality is like determining the aesthetic quality of a symphony or a painting. It can only be done by judges, and yet which judges should we use? It is unwise and misleading to talk about the aesthetic quality of something when the judgments vary with the judges used, and also with the decade when the judgments are made.

The field of personality as it has been studied deals with the ways that people construe other people and their behavior. The study of such construals is a worthwhile enterprise in itself, provided that some means can be found for including the construer in our formulations. As mentioned earlier, a personality rating involves a rater, a ratee, and a task or reason for making the rating. Such a rating is a representation of the core of "personality," the attributing of characteristics to others. And just as in analyzing ratings, so in examining personality: we have to give explicit recognition to the person who is interpreting perceptions and impressions and making inferences about some other person.

Another profitable enterprise is the empirical study of the attributive process. Just what does go on in making ratings? In everyday life, how are attributions arrived at? We know all too little about these crucial phenomena occurring all the time in all of us.

A related approach is the study of evaluative judgments that people make about other people in carrying out the activities in the everyday world.

Professors write letters of recommendation. Supervisors decide whether an employee is doing the job well. Clinicians and others judge the adequacy of a person's adaptation to other individuals and to society. We can help make those evaluative judgments of good quality, for the benefit of the person judged and of the institutions in which that person participates. (These approaches are discussed at considerable length in a book I published a few months ago: Strategies for Personality Research.)

At this point, let me quote a few sentences from Reed and Jackson (1977, p. 3):

"Traits, like constructs, are abstractions from observables..."

"What people manifest are not traits, but behavior...." and one more:

"To say that traits exist in people is to confuse the conceptual system with the behavior they are intended to describe." So let's go back to behavior. To understand the behavior of people around us, let us avoid the use of conceptualizations abstracted from impressions about behavior. Let us not rely on ratings, those cognitive products resulting from complex internal processes about which we can know so little.

To build a science of behavior, we have to start with observations that are independent of the individual observer, that is, with observations on which observers can agree almost perfectly. These are the kind of data used in the well established sciences. Consider Don Campbell's statement (1961): "The greater the direct accessibility of the stimuli to sense receptors, the greater the intersubjective verifiability of the observation" (p. 340). Let us look at simple, short behaviors that observers can identify with a minimum of interpretation and inference. These actions include: Is the person talking or not? Is he smiling? Is she looking at the other person? Is he gesturing? These

are literally where the action is, in the interactions so central to the phenomena of personality. These judgments involve concepts, to be sure, but the concepts are at a very low level of abstraction. They can be judged as they occur, at that moment or on a videotape. And the accuracy of these judgments can be checked by playing the videotape once again.

So let us look at these actions to which other people re-act almost instantaneously. During an interaction between two people, there are many regularities in such action sequences (see the book that Duncan and I got out last year, Face-to-Face Interactions). And in addition to the common features in interactions, there are the strategies that a participant can adopt--optional actions that affect the probabilities of subsequent actions of the other person. There is good reason to believe that the individual flavor of human interactions can be systematically pinned down.

To sum up: the controversy over structures in ratings and in judgments of semantic similarity has brought out with increasing clarity the facts that retrospective ratings do reflect the cognitive schemas of raters and hence that ratings do depend upon raters. It has also served to help us see that obtained structures for sets of personality variables are a function of the particular variables and of the way the variables are applied. There is no one structure of personality. Any obtained structure is based on some array of complex cognitive processes construing impressions formed from observing one or more extended segments of behavior.

We can choose to study such construals in their own right or we can choose to learn how such construals are made. Alternatively, we can try to understand the behavior of people as they interact with each other, analysing the complex flow of ongoing behaving into action sequences observable on a moment-to-moment basis.

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